

JONATHAN ISRAEL

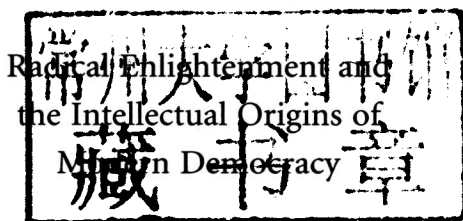
# A REVOLUTION OF THE MIND

Radical Enlightenment and the  
Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy



Jonathan Israel

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## *Preface*

In recent years historians and philosophers have made rapid strides in uncovering the main stages and the general history of the Radical Enlightenment. An originally clandestine movement of ideas, almost entirely hidden from public view during its earliest phase (the late seventeenth century), and maturing in opposition to the moderate mainstream Enlightenment dominant in Europe and America in the eighteenth century, radical thought burst into the open in the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s during the revolutionary era in America, France, Britain, Ireland, and the Netherlands, as well as in underground democratic opposition circles in Germany, Scandinavia, Latin America, and elsewhere. Radical Enlightenment is now widely seen as the current of thought (and eventually political action) that played the primary role in grounding the egalitarian and democratic core values and ideals of the modern world.

Radical Enlightenment is a set of basic principles that can be summed up concisely as: democracy; racial and

sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression, and the press; eradication of religious authority from the legislative process and education; and full separation of church and state. It sees the purpose of the state as being the wholly secular one of promoting the worldly interests of the majority and preventing vested minority interests from capturing control of the legislative process. Its chief maxim is that all men have the same basic needs, rights, and status irrespective of what they believe or what religious, economic, or ethnic group they belong to, and that consequently all ought to be treated alike, on the basis of equity, whether black or white, male or female, religious or nonreligious, and that all deserve to have their personal interests and aspirations equally respected by law and government. Its universalism lies in its claim that all men have the same right to pursue happiness in their own way, and think and say whatever they see fit, and no one, including those who convince others they are divinely chosen to be their masters, rulers, or spiritual guides, is justified in denying or hindering others in the enjoyment of rights that pertain to all men and women equally.

These principles, broadly accepted nowhere in the world before the American Revolution—and by no means fully implemented there whilst slavery persisted and many whites as well as blacks and Indians remained excluded from voting and political participation in the decades after 1776—are only very patchily accepted by societies

and governments in much of the world today. But while in many places these core democratic values retain only a precarious foothold, they did finally triumph in much of the world after 1945. With the struggle against Fascism and Stalinism, and especially after the end of the Second World War and the commencement of decolonialization (beginning in the late 1940s), modern representative democracy and equality before the law have become generally entrenched in the legal and legislative apparatus not just of Western Europe, America, and the wider English-speaking world, but also, from the late 1940s, for the first time became firmly grounded in several key Asian countries, most notably India and Japan, at least at the level of officially approved policy, law, and education.

Surprising as it may seem, the history of this process—the gradual advance of the ideas underpinning democratic Enlightenment in the modern era—remains very little studied or known. Indeed, there exist scarcely any historical accounts that analyze and narrate the story of the origins and rise of modern equality, democracy, individual liberty, and freedom of thought in their intellectual, social, and political context. Until recently, historians of the French Revolution still thought of it (and many still do) as “inventing a new form of political discourse” rather than as a struggle between rival ideologies complexly evolving over the previous century. Of course, no one would deny that there exists an impressive mass of studies, especially by political and social scientists, analyzing the

concepts of equality, democracy, and individual liberty as abstract propositions. But there are virtually none that describe in the contexts of history and culture the actual emergence of these ideas. As one scholar recently noted, the word “democracy” has (since 1945) generally been “a pretext for ideological endorsement rather than a term for a historically rooted process.”<sup>1</sup> This is equally true of equality. While there is “plenty of work on equality,” another commentator observes, “there is precious little in the modern literature on the background to the idea that we humans are, fundamentally, one another’s equals.”<sup>2</sup> The story of the emergence of modern democratic core values as a Western and global historical phenomenon before 1789 remains—in America, Europe, Africa, and Asia alike—a gigantic yawning gap.

The risk in considering our core values as purely abstract concepts that do not require examination in their historical context, or imagining the French Revolution invented them, is that we then remain blind to how, why, and where these concepts first emerged amid conflict and controversy, and the means whereby they slowly advanced in the teeth of widespread opposition and eventually became first intellectually and then politically hegemonic. Not only scholars but also the general reading, debating, and voting public need some awareness of the tremendous difficulty, struggle, and cost involved in propagating our core ideas in the face of the long-dominant monarchical, aristocratic, and religious ideologies, privi-



leged oligarchies and elites, and in the face also of the various Counter-Enlightenment popular movements that so resolutely and vehemently combated egalitarian and democratic values from the mid-seventeenth century down to the crushing of Nazism, the supreme Counter-Enlightenment, in 1945.

Radical Enlightenment is the system of ideas that, historically, has principally shaped the Western World's most basic social and cultural values in the post-Christian age. This in itself lends the history of the movement great importance. But this type of thought—especially in many Asian and African countries, as well as in contemporary Russia—has also become the chief hope and inspiration of numerous besieged and harassed humanists, egalitarians, and defenders of human rights, who, often against great odds, heroically champion basic human freedom and dignity, including that of women, minorities, homosexuals, and religious apostates, in the face of the resurgent forms of bigotry, oppression, and prejudice that in much of the world today appear inexorably to be extending their grip.

It is perhaps this global dimension above all that lends the history of radical thought its continuing relevance in our time. Democratic, secular, and egalitarian ideas dismally failed to be accepted or officially sponsored in very many new countries emerging in the 1950s and 1960s through decolonization, desegregation, and the spread of anticolonialism. Consequently, there still exists relatively

little understanding of the intellectual grounds of these ideals in most of the developing world while, even in the West, these values, being very recent as publicly and officially endorsed principles, remain only weakly embedded in education, the media, and in many people's minds. Besides the urgent need to strengthen democratic awareness, it is also vital to gather from the Radical Enlightenment's history how exactly the core ideas of modern Western secularism interconnect and function together socially and culturally as a set, and how, after nearly three centuries of constant and sometimes massive repression, they eventually came to be embraced (sometimes half-heartedly and incompletely) by ruling elites and the West's legal systems. Furthermore, key teachings of the Radical Enlightenment continue to offer pertinent and unsettling lessons. Who can doubt that ignorance and credulity, identified by the eighteenth-century radical enlighteners as the prime cause of human degradation and oppression, remain still the foremost foes of democracy, equality, and personal freedom; or that an informal aristocracy, like that which arose in America, eventually nurturing vast inequality of wealth, can endanger equality and individual liberty as much as any formal nobility based on lineage, rank, and legally anchored privilege?

Since Radical Enlightenment emerged in opposition to mainstream thinking, and still clashes with the traditions and cherished beliefs of many, it is hardly surprising that its perceived irreligion, libertinism, and subversiveness

drew immense hostility and disapproval in the past, not least in Britain and America, and still excite fierce opposition in many quarters. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national narratives were particularly an obstacle to the study of the rise of democratic and egalitarian ideas. Unrelenting stress on the overriding importance of national identity frequently obscured the rise of modern democratic and egalitarian values or led to an exaggerated notion of the imagined uniqueness of individual countries' contributions. Thus, the Dutch supposed their golden age (in the seventeenth century) was far more tolerant than it really was, remaining unaware that when the modern concepts of individual liberty and freedom of thought were originally introduced by Enlightenment thinkers and publicists in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of their countrymen (no less than the British and Americans) staunchly opposed them.

More recently, among the foremost challenges to Radical Enlightenment principles, and one particularly threatening to modern society, was the modish multiculturalism infused with postmodernism that swept Western universities and local government in the 1980s and 1990s. For this briefly potent new form of intellectual orthodoxy deemed all traditions and sets of values more or less equally valid, categorically denying the idea of a universal system of higher values self-evident in reason and equity, or entitled to claim superiority over other

values. In particular, many Western intellectuals and local government policymakers argued that to attribute universal validity and superiority over other cultural traditions to core values forged in the Western Enlightenment smacks, whatever its pretensions to rational cogency, of Eurocentrism, elitism, and lack of basic respect for the “other.”

Based on a lecture series delivered at Oxford between January and March 2008, in commemoration of the life and work of Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), one of the major intellectuals of the twentieth century, this small volume has been slightly expanded and in part substantially revised in response to questioning and debate with academic colleagues and students about its arguments. Among the chief features of Sir Isaiah’s intellectual legacy were his valiant efforts to pull philosophy and history closer together (no easy task) and establish what in his time was the virtually new discipline of “intellectual history.” Accordingly, I hope that what follows will stand as a small tribute to his memory and achievements, especially by again attempting to draw philosophy and history into a closer, more meaningful partnership.

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CHAPTER I

**Progress and the Enlightenment's  
Two Conflicting Ways of  
Improving the World**

**T**hat notions concerning “progress,” “improvement of society,” and what one now-forgotten radical-minded novelist of the 1790s termed the “amelioration of the state of mankind” were central to the Enlightenment is scarcely surprising.<sup>1</sup> Four out of six of the Enlightenment’s philosophical founding figures—Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bayle—held that most people’s ideas about the most fundamental questions are wildly wrong and that were it possible to improve men’s ideas about the world and about the structure of reality, this, in itself, would significantly improve human existence. For it would make society safer and more stable (Hobbes’s main concern), more tolerant (Bayle’s main concern), more rational in its approach to disasters and health problems



(one of Descartes' aims), and also freer and more accepting of the dissenting individual.

All four of these philosophical founders shared in generating this "revolutionary" tendency in Western modernity and hence in forging the dramatically new way of viewing the world that began with them and with the more general cultural changes of the Enlightenment era. Spinoza, however, with his one-substance doctrine—that body and soul, matter and mind are not distinct substances but rather one single substance viewed under different aspects—extends this "revolutionary" tendency appreciably further metaphysically, politically, and as regards man's highest good than do Descartes, Hobbes, or Bayle. On Spinoza's principles, society would become more resistant to being manipulated by religious authority, autocracy, powerful oligarchies and dictatorship, and more democratic, libertarian and egalitarian. Thereby, he creates a sharper opposition than the rest between philosophy and theology, characteristics that make him the first major figure of the Radical Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

The reformation of ideas projected by these great thinkers, however, offered only the theoretical possibility of improvement, not the actuality, and both Hobbes and Bayle remained generally rather pessimistic. By the later eighteenth century, however, there had been a remarkable change. Now it appeared that such a revolution in thinking and circumstances was not just a theoretical possibility but something real. "The world," declared Richard